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ABSTRACT

The report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress entitled "Poor Writing Performance Blamed on Scant Writing Practice" makes it clear that little progress has been made in the improvement of students' writing. This is true in part because the conditions for teaching writing are unsatisfatory. The time has come to undertake a major series of efforts to alter public and administrative attitudes on the matter of class size, teacher load, and other circumstances that have negative effects on the teaching of writing. The headquarters staff at the National Council of Teachers of English, in cooperation with its Standing Committee on Affiliates, has been developing materials to launch public relations efforts on issues that affect the teaching of English. Research shows a need for radical reduction in class size and radically different methods of instruction. Professionals in the field of English need to speak out loudly on the issues of class size, workload, and the general conditions for teaching writing. (SRT)

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STARTER SHEET

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SLATE Support for the Learning and Teaching of English

The Time Has Come

During the summer of 1986, NCTE received from the National Assessment of Educational Progress a report entitled "Poor Writing Performance Blamed on Scant Writing Practice." The report was also sent to all elementary and secondary principals in the U.S., informing them of the progress or lack of progress in the teaching of writing, according to data from the 1974 and 1984 assessments. The gist of the report is that we have not made much progress despite a decade of efforts to improve writing through such means as the National Writing Project, the growth and dissemination of new modes of teaching, and visible and concerted efforts to improve the teaching of writing.

It is tempting to fault the assessment as a means of evaluating progress, but there is little purpose in doing so. However, it is not only correct but necessary to decry the gloomy conclusion by some pundits that the new methodologies are ineffective. What decision makers must realize is that the vast enterprise of American education changes extremely slowly. The current enthusiasm for teaching writing more effectively is shared by only a small fraction of teachers of English. In short, it's too early to judge whether the new movements are promising ones, and certainly it's too early to abandon them.

Beyond these concerns, however, is the long-standing fact that the conditions for teaching writing are abominable. Everybody seems to agree on this point, but nobody seems to be doing anything about it. The time has come, it seems to me, to undertake a major series of efforts to alter public and administrative attitudes on the matter of class size, teacher load, and other circumstances which have deleterious effects on the teaching of writing.

Significantly, the very first article in the very first issue of *English Journal* in January 1912 posed the question, "Can Good Composition Teaching be Done Under Present Conditions?" The author's answer to that question was no. Class size was a critical factor in his gloomy description, and he wrote at a time when only 10 percent of eligible students were enrolled in high schools. Obviously, things have changed remarkably in the succeeding 75 years. Today 90 percent of the eligible students are enrolled. Yet we still have large classes where composition is taught. Yes, it's time to do something.

Personally, I welcome the disappointing statistics from the National Assessment. They provide an occasion to trumpet the NCTE point of view about class size and workload. If the nation is serious about improving writing—and all signs are that it is—the time is ripe to shout from our rooftops that conditions are bad and that we cannot be satisfied with current conditions.

The headquarters staff, in cooperation with the Standing Committee on Affiliates, has been developing prototype materials for use by affiliates in launching public relations efforts on issues that beset teachers of English. The materials focus largely on procedures, but the substantive material in the guidebook develops and elaborates a program of attention to class size, workload, and conditions for teaching English. After a period of testing the new material, we hope that all affiliates will form effective public information programs. SLATE Representatives can play a major role in the formation and implementation of these public information programs. I hope, further, that the leaders of those programs will make their first order of business the launching of local programs of information to the public through the media concerning the unsavory conditions for teaching writing.

For nearly 40 years, NCTE has advocated a ratio of 100 students per teacher in secondary schools. That figure may be too high to permit really effective teaching of writing, but we are still far away from even that modest goal. The time is ripe to renew our battle cry and our arguments. What supporting research there is points to two truths: (1) that there needs to be a *radical* reduction in class size and (2) that it must be accompanied by radically different methods of instruction. While the second goal is within our reach, the former is not. The battle for improved class size must be fought at the state and local level; it is there that teaching conditions

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are determined by people who need to be informed of the facts.

The major sadness is that conditions for teaching writing are so bad that composition is not being taught—even in thousands of English classes—in any real sense. Mindless grammar drills, concentration on anything *but* writing to avoid the inevitably excessive workload—these are grim indicators. The public cannot have what the public supposedly wants until the conditions for teaching writing are improved.

English teachers worry about a lot of things (some of them only dimly related to English teaching). But it seems clear to me that when we stand up and holler, we need to be talking first about class size, workload, and the general conditions for teaching writing. The year ahead provides us with a variety of opportunities to speak out to the public (and other teachers are part of that public) about the harmful conditions that make effective teaching of writing virtually impossible.

The time has come to speak out loudly and strongly on this central issue. There are few things more critical to our work. And there *is* something you can do about it.

—John C. Maxwell

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